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# Capacity Building in the public sector

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*The research group Capacity Building and Evaluation was established in 2016 as a result of a shared interest Capacity Building, which at the time was an emerging phenomenon in the public sector. In a survey of the field, it soon became clear that the appearance of Capacity Building in the public sector coincided with a growing orientation towards a Collaborative Governance philosophy forming the basis of public sector management. Co-creation forms part of the Collaborative Governance philosophy. The research group sees Capacity Building as both a means for and an objective of co-creation. The text is an excerpt from the book "Co-creation and Capacity Building in the public sector", edited by Professor Hanne Kathrine Krogstrup and compiled by contributions from the researchers in the research group.*

This paper introduces the concept of Capacity Building as a possible approach to the development of the concept of co-production. Initially, the paper offers a definition and a number of concept characteristics of Capacity Building, while stating that it is not possible to give an unambiguous definition of the concept. Subsequently, an account is given of the theoretical history of the concept from *social development perspectives, the strength perspective* and *empowerment approaches* to the application of the concept in management literature. Then follows a distinction between Capacity Building at individual and organisational levels, and the concept is linked to Human Resource Management. The paper concludes with a discussion as to the extent to which it is realistic to introduce a Capacity Building focus in an organisational development strategy in the public sector.

## Definitions and characteristics

The selection of the Capacity Building concept as a frame of reference for co-production is an expression of the authors' choice. Other options for enriching the co-production concept might have been economic theory, decision theory, psychological or sociological theory etc. However, Co-production and Capacity Building represent two sides of the same coin: Co-production is an organisational recipe, whereas Capacity Building is a possible road to take towards the *realisation* of the organisational recipe; at the same time, Capacity Building is an objective of co-production.

The challenge is that no unambiguous definition of the concept is found, nor is there consensus as to the implications of Capacity Building in practice (Kaplan 2000). Already in 1981, an author ironically concluded that it is unlikely that a consensus definition of the concept will ever be reached on "this holy grail" (Honadle 1981). And so far, this assumption has proved to be correct.

## Definition

We take as our point of departure this definition of Capacity Building: any action which contributes to the improvement of the capability of individuals, organisations or systems to achieve their own goals. Capacity Building involves the “continuous enhancement of capabilities”, but also concerns the building of the capacity to identify the need for further development as well as the need for new competences which may enable the formulation and achievement of own goals. This definition may be seen as a compilation of a large number of definitions which are too numerous to elaborate in this context (Milen 2001, Kaplan 2000, Honadle 1981, Stringer 2013, Banyan 2015 etc.). What has an effect on whom and to what extent will vary according to context. However, it is assumed that a human being’s capacity to make choices, set priorities and act will optimise their opportunity for development and the achievement of their own goals (Ku and Yuen-Tsang 2011). As a concept, Capacity Building has the double content of shared problem solving (co-production) combined with the competence development of individuals, communities and the (local) society. This duality is at the heart of the Capacity Building concept. In a Capacity Building perspective, it is not sufficient, for instance, that the doctor has evidence for the diagnosis they make or the treatment they suggest; they must also include the psychological mechanisms that will enable the patient to build confidence and achieve the knowledge required to manage their condition.

The above-mentioned characteristics can be summarised to express a special approach to processes of change at all levels in society, in organisations and in individuals. This will be described in more detail in the following.

## Characteristics

Capacity Building is a continuous process for the enhancement of the capabilities of individuals, organisations and institutions to achieve their goals. It is an internal organisational process based on existing strengths rather than a process that starts from scratch (Milen 2001: 6). As an approach to change, Capacity Building is based on the assumption that the sustainable development of society, organisations, and individuals requires the involvement of existing local, human and cultural resources. (Ku and Yuen-Tsang 2011, Davis et al. 2015). Thus, in a Capacity Building perspective, all types of processes of change may be understood in light of the fact that different individuals have different backgrounds, positions and competences as well as different social and cultural opportunities to take part in and build networks and communities in and outside of the organisation. Therefore, Capacity Building is concerned with the implementation of these potential resources through processes of change and development. Accordingly, an essential element is the organisation’s capacity to manage change and progression towards the realisation of its objectives (Milen 2001). The reason why Capacity Building is not easily definable may be that the content of the concept is deeply embedded in a given context. In other words, the way in which Capacity Building is manifested in concrete terms will depend on the concrete context in which it is unfolded.

## CONTEXTS FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

For the potential mould-breaking student, Capacity Building may be that the student is met by positive expectations from their teacher, suggesting that if they make an extra work effort, it will be realistic to expect that they will achieve the marks necessary to reach upper secondary school and later on achieve their dream education. To this should be added, of course, that the adequate teaching must be offered. For the COPD patient, Capacity Building may involve the peace of mind invoked by the monitoring of their condition, because it has been explained to the patient what is happening, and the patient understands this and will therefore be aware of any critical symptoms. As a result, the patient will feel more comfortable about going shopping and moving about in public spaces and will also be alert to any changes in their condition which may then be taken care of so that hospitalisation may be avoided.

In many fields, such as pedagogy, health care and farming capacity Building is a wellknown concept. Moreover, the Capacity Building concept has become an integral part of a diversity of disciplines, such as evaluation, human resource development, strategic management and change management (AIDSTAR-TWO 2010, Milen 2001). Finally, in line with co-production, the concept is used at macro- (e.g. development aid with many organisations involved), meso- (e.g. local organisations and institutions) and micro-levels (in relation to individuals).

The conclusion is that Capacity Building is seen and takes place in concrete contexts involving human interaction.

## Objective

The theoretical assumption in recent literature is that Capacity Building will contribute to the achievement of a larger outcome of government welfare expenditure, and to an increase in service user satisfaction. The logic is that an increase in service users' own capacity will also increase their quality of life while reducing their need for government support. This requires that Capacity Building takes place in a parallel process at the organisational level, and that Capacity Building becomes an integral part of the public sector's understanding of their tasks (Davis et al. 2015:47). As we shall return to later in the paper, Capacity Building is not a quick fix, and in fact we know relatively little about the effects of Capacity Building.

## Capacity Building in a conceptual and historical context

Prior to delimiting the Capacity Building concept, it may be relevant to study the historical background and development of the concept, even though its origin is not clear and unambiguous.

In the origin of the Capacity Building concept an element of idealism is embedded. In various contexts, Capacity Building was seen as an element in a higher objective concerned with ensuring sustainable institutional and cultural structures. This probably relates to the fact that one of the early sources of inspiration for Capacity Building were the thoughts of Latin-American thinker and

pedagogue Paolo Freire regarding liberation and democratic participation in processes of change (Ku and Yuen -Tsang 2011, Eade 1997). Freire understood social change as an educational project in the broad sense. Education is not seen as knowledge transfer from the more knowledgeable to the less knowledgeable, but as a problem solving and learning process through a joint dialogue. This dialogue should take place in all contexts of society, reflecting the approach that all people are equal and experts in their own lives (Ku and Yuen-Tsang 2011, Freire 1970). This was a radical stance in the sense that not only the well-educated citizens but also the poor and socially exposed were assumed to contribute to the development of society. The intention was that through a type of deducted competence development, these population groups learnt to assume power over their own lives (Eade 1997, Freire 1970). Thus, in the early development of the Capacity Building concept, focus was on both individual and collective learning as a prerequisite for the building of capacity (Noya et al. 2009, Freire 1970). Over the years, the Capacity Building concept has also drawn inspiration from a number of other theoretical approaches:

*The social development approach*, which must also be characterised as an early approach to Capacity Building, is oriented towards the political macro level (Ku and Yuen-Tsang 2011). In this perspective, the Capacity Building concept has a clear ideological objective of securing that the social and economic policies contribute to social welfare and the involvement and inclusion of people in society. The clearest exponents of this approach were the United Nations' (UNECD 1992) and the World Bank's programmes as well as the European Union's development policy.

#### AN EU PROGRAMME IN TANZANIA

An EU-funded programme to combat poverty in Tanzania is working closely with the local government on infrastructure development. This means that the coordination of complex causal chains takes place in an equal dialogue between EU officials, government representatives, local politicians and officials, with a view to Capacity Building for local reforms. Again, the aim is twofold: Through this collaboration effort, the local government does not only achieve the necessary knowledge on road building, but also the capacity to assume responsibility for the establishment of an infrastructure which will contribute to reducing poverty for the poorest part of the population living in fringe areas (Toulemonde et al. 2011: 126).

More recent trends link Capacity Building to discourses and practices regarding social and environmental sustainability, competence development (particularly in developing countries) and the building of competences within international collaboration relations (Grindle and Hilderbrandt 1995, Farazmand 2004, Priddy 2013, Foster-Fishman et al. 2001). In this understanding, Capacity Building is largely seen as the capacity to manage growth development, and sustainability, which refers to the fact that development continues even though possible expertise withdraws from the projects.

The conceptual development that has shaped the Capacity Building concept in a more organisational direction draws inspiration from the *strength perspective* and the *empowerment approach*.

The strength perspective relates to a more concrete action perspective and aims to mobilise human and organisational resources. (Weick et al. 1989, Ku og Yuen-Tsang 2011). This approach “sees

possibilities rather than limitations”, viewing for instance population groups, which are traditionally considered to be in need of help or less competent, as capable of changing their own lives and contexts in a positive direction. In popular terms, “what we are good at” will be taken as a point of departure, and the question will be asked how these strengths may be implemented in order to solve immediate challenges and new ones that may emerge in the future (Noya et al. 2009). The organisational objective is, through collaboration and the active involvement of individuals, to develop welfare services (Stringer 2013). This may resemble the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to organisation and competence development. In this respect, members of the organisation will create dreams and visions on the basis of “the best of what there already is” in a concrete creative process of change and learning. The process will ideally result in meaningful ownership of the change for the individual member of the organisation (Cooperrider et al. 2005). AI is already a widespread approach to change management in public sector institutions (Dall 2011, Willig 2009). The Capacity Building approach differs from AI because of its clear intention to identify the problems and issues of the organisation, while the strengths and resources are used to solve the identified problems. Sometimes the AI approach is criticised for not possessing this particular capacity to develop the ability to reflect, evaluate and set up new goals in relation to internal and external challenges (Willig 2009, Fry 2011, Holmgren 2002). This is what the Capacity Building approach is believed to be capable of supporting. In the *empowerment approach*, Capacity Building is assumed to prompt personal development, a positive self-image and a critical understanding of the social and political realities in the individual’s surroundings. Therefore, the primary objective of Capacity Building as empowerment is for local communities to obtain control over the resources and opportunities which are necessary for them to understand and impact their own surroundings (Fetterman et al. 2015: 21). When this objective is transferred to an organisational context, the empowerment approach points out that the resources and existing competences of the organisation (Davis et al. 2015) will emancipate the service users. This is assumed to enable them to manage their own situation on the basis of the skills, competences and knowledge acquired by both the service users and in the members of staff they encounter. The result should be that actors and organisations/institutions acquire influence on and competences to fulfil change processes and to implement these on the basis of their respective social or organisational positions.

In this respect, Capacity Building may resemble the *recovery approach* to rehabilitation in for instance psychiatric treatment and care for the elderly. The recovery approach includes a basic belief in the development potential of the individual service user and in the effect of collaboration between the service user and the professional (Pedersen 2004, Wilken and Hollander 2008). In a Capacity Building perspective, however, it is assumed that not only the service user builds capacity and options for action through collaboration. The professional and the organisation in general will also develop competences in the process of solving the task of supporting the service user’s development (Jones 2001: 93). The consequence is that decisions regarding objectives and visions and the methods of implementing these are made in the organisational context in which the member of staff and the service users feel the consequences of these. This means that the ideal of the empowerment approach to Capacity Building is to spread the organisation’s decision-making power, and that processes of change include a large amount of involvement and participation.

As mentioned above, in recent years, Capacity Building has become widely represented in the literature on management, Human Resource management, organisational visions and strategies, the management of organisations, monitoring and evaluation, financial management, NGOs etc. Thus, Capacity Building in relation to organisational development is not a new concept (AIDSTAR-TWO 2010, Milen 2001). Moreover, the literature on Capacity Building presents some 300 Capacity Building tools such as seminars, workshops and individual training. In contrast, knowledge of the effects of Capacity Building is characterised by having been recorded primarily at an anecdotal level. Empirical knowledge is called for if Capacity Building is not to remain primarily an ideological concept (AIDSTAR- TWO 2010). We cannot in this paper present an empirical underpinning of the potentials of Capacity Building. However, in collaboration with the Aalborg Municipality and the Innovation Fund Denmark, the research group behind the paper has established an industrial PhD project (Nanna Møller Mortensen) within the area of the elderly and handicapped with a view to achieving a higher degree of empirical support of Capacity Building related to co-production, including the evaluation of effects.

### Capacity Building in organisations

As mentioned above, Capacity Building is an internal organisational issue as well as an inter-organisational matter. A bottom-up driven school development project in England constitutes an example of how different levels in Capacity Building may interact. To solve an issue regarding much absence and low levels of well-being and motivation in pupils, this project started with a hearing among pupils, in which they formulated their insights into pupil life as well as their needs and ideas regarding teaching activities. These needs and ideas were then included as essential elements in a capacity building process in which the teachers together with the pupils developed new teaching approaches, the management supported new ways of organising teaching activities, and school-home collaboration was organised in a new way (Flutter og Rudduck 2004: 7). This is an illustrative example of Capacity Building at several levels:

*The individual level:* Building pupils' ability to formulate insights, needs and ideas, and teachers' ability to listen and act by seeking knowledge to develop new and pupil-involving methods, resulted in Capacity Building at the individual level. The individual perspective often involves learning, competence development and sometimes education (Stringer 2013, Banyan 2015, Noya et al. 2009). Thus, individual Capacity Building takes place when the individual experiences their own competence in problem solving and sees themselves as a person capable of contributing to their own development as well as to that of the organisation (Stringer 2013).

The management's ability to listen to the teachers' need for new ways of organising teaching activities is seen as Capacity Building at management and organisational levels, pointing towards the development of:

"institutional, organisational, managerial, technological (both soft and hard), cultural and individual, abilities, capabilities, skills and knowledge of a government and public

sector administration system to not only manage today but also tomorrow" (Farazmand 2004).

*The external organisational level:* New school-home collaboration types were a sign of the organisation's ability to involve the local community in Capacity Building at an external organisational level. This is an example of more extensive Capacity Building in which the organisation has found it necessary to create new structures in order to involve and collaborate with the parents, who might potentially feel that they did not understand the new teaching methods (Flutter and Rudduck 2004). This requires of the organisation that it nurtures the ability to develop policies, programmes and projects which are based on self-corrective organisational behaviour (Farazmand 2004: 5), but also on creativity, communication and collaboration. In this example, all changes took place within a government-established framework, but on the basis of a local problem-solving process initiated by the organisation itself.

This ability to listen to agents at different levels and to act and learn from changes are characteristics of Capacity Building in the context of a public sector organisation. In summary, organisational Capacity Building encompasses "the ability to perform the core function, which entails future-oriented and anticipatory capabilities as well as abilities to govern, manage and motivate" (Farazmand 2004). This requires highly qualified, well prepared, flexible and motivated people at all levels in organisations, ranging from political actors to members of staff in the executive functions and to service users (Farazmand 2004: 6).

The above examples and conceptual perspectives demonstrate how the human dimension is the focal point of organisational development, change and learning processes. It will therefore be meaningful to include the organisation's overall Human Resource approach, if Capacity Building is the method and objective of co-production in the public sector..

### Capacity Building in an organisational development perspective

The thesis in Capacity Building is that changes are unlikely to succeed if the human conditions for this are not present in the organisation or if all stakeholders do not develop negotiated ownership of the change in the process. The Capacity Building approach may explain, for instance, why it is not possible to transfer best practice from one municipality to another, even though the structures and resources seem identical.. One reason is that the Human Resource capacity available in the exporting context is different from that of the importing context. Therefore, it is vital that a match exists between the introduction of new interventions on the one hand and the organisation's options for implementation of these, on the other. This requires, of course, that the necessary structures and resources are available; but also that contextual Capacity Building takes place at all levels: among service users and members of staff and managers. This breaks with the "one size fits all"- strategy; interventions must always be translated to the local organisational context.

This translation work implies, first of all, that the Capacity Building approach focuses on the exploitation of local organisational knowledge and resources, including a strong involvement and



learning dimension. In other words, local needs and issues are solved locally on the basis of the concrete individuals and organisations involved through the development of durable and sustainable structures, resources and involvement and the existing ability to manage positive change (Davis et al 2015).

Secondly, this means that Capacity Building at the organisational level in welfare institutions implies several types of relations in the management chain, e.g. the relation between service users and front-line staff, the relation between front-line staff and management and the relation between the management and the political level. In combination, the knowledge, competences and resources embedded in the organisation, its members and its local foundation in networks and service user and collaboration relations are considered to be the organisation's change-creating potential (Lewis et al. 2014).

Thirdly, this means that identification as to how Capacity Building should take place in an organisation is context and time dependent. In other words, identification of the need for Capacity Building is empirically defined as 'the gap'. On the one hand, the gap is a measure of the distance between the demands made by a given organisational change, and, on the other hand, the organisation's ability to meet these demands (Stringer 2013: 12). This gap is expected to shift continuously as the degree of Capacity Building increases. Fourthly, the translation work requires that competence for self-evaluation is developed in the organisation, as Capacity Building focuses on the organisation's ability to collaborate with their relevant networks and service users on implementing, managing and evaluating solutions with a view to currently adapting their initiatives to the actual development. If the anticipated effect is not apparent, an initiative must be revised by the actors themselves in order that decisions and adjustments are made in the practice affected and by the people who will feel the consequences. In most contexts, this will require what is referred to as Evaluation Capacity Building (Cousins et al 2014).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined the Capacity Building concept, and delimited Capacity Building to take place in local public sector organisations and particularly in the complex relation between individual, organisational and a (local) community levels. In addition, Capacity Building has been related to co-production in public sector organisations: Capacity Building is a working method in co-production, while the choice of Capacity Building establishes a particular framework for the premises of co-production. Co-production may result in increased Capacity Building, while Capacity Building is seen as a precondition for co-production. In this sense, the Capacity Building concept provides a theoretical basis for the concept of co-production.

A Capacity Building approach to co-production will constitute a complex of changes which cannot be implemented in a jiffy. In recent years, a culture has developed in the public sector organisations in which evidence thinking and New Public Management has included a strong element of an external management perspective. . Such context-independent knowledge on processes and procedures developed in systems widely separated from the everyday lives of citizens. This means that some types of internal management must be (re)learnt.

The mere fact that the service users are viewed from a resource and not a lacking resource perspective, breaks with the development of recent years. For the past many years, managers have been allocated a role as evidence using experts regarding the situation of service users and/or experts in managing and controlling by means of top-down performance criteria (Sehested and Leonardsen 2011, Reff and Johansen 2011). Capacity Building turns these expert and management logics upside down in order to create space for not only the building of capacity among the service users,, but also to enable all involved parties, including professionals, managers, administrative employees and politicians to gain knowledge from the processes leading to experienced improvements of welfare.

When Collaborative Governance organisation recipes, including co-production, becomes a key element in the management and control of the public sector, this does not imply that radical changes suddenly occur as regards the management and control methods in public sector organisations. The dominance of some management paradigms are weakened, while others are strengthened, and elements from different control recipes converge, merge and form a hybrid. In other words, recipes are not used in their pure form (Røvik 2007: 64).

The result of this hybrid formation may be that public sector organisations maintain the logics of well-known control paradigms and culturally embedded world views, while the terminology and concepts of Capacity Building are being assimilated and applied. This assimilation of terminology and concepts without a radical change of underlying logics and control rationale may cause both service users and public sectors to remain in a status quo, which does not lead to the desired changes (Noya et al. 2009). If, for instance, public sector organisations operate on the basis of an underlying, culturally embedded view of the service user as a person who lacks knowledge, competences etc., and the professional as a person who can impart to the service user that which they are lacking (Sehested og Leonardsen 2011), working with Capacity Building may be difficult. The result of the ‘lacking approach’ to social issues may be that, in spite of intentions to the contrary, the service user’s voice will be overheard, because the service user’s conduct, success and results are measured against the mainstream understanding of “the good life”, as determined by external performance criteria (Noya et al. 2009). . If this is the case, the actors (service users, professionals, managers, the administration and the political level) are deprived of their opportunity to jointly develop their own locally based values, norms, competences, experience, knowledge and skills in a mutual learning process, i.e. Capacity Building (Beazley et al. 2004).

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